

# Learning traits in Postsecondary CTE:

A Discussion on Classroom and Career

BY ROBERT BRACE

**H**aving served several years in a rapidly growing field, a tradesman enters the postsecondary classroom for the first time as an instructor. He thinks with confidence, "I know my trade inside and out."

#### **But how well can you share it?**

Down the hall, a new administrator entering his office for the first time promises himself, "My school will certify more students for industry work than any other school in the area."

#### **But will industry find them ready?**

The postsecondary career and technical education (CTE) institution sits at the nexus of two factors: what the student brings upon entrance to, and what the industry will call for upon exit from, its programs. Postsecondary CTE programs can serve as a catalyst for these components, which hit it from polar angles. This article explores these factors using published works as well as e-mail correspondence from individuals well-versed in various learning-trait models.

#### **Student Learning**

In a classroom of 20 students, the instructor can expect to teach 20 individual classes simultaneously. There is a range of learning traits spread throughout any given classroom's student body. The world of education has seen multiple learning-trait models from varied theoretical viewpoints and with differing definitions. Lynna Ausburn has been involved with more than one research project using ATLAS, a tool to identify learning strategies. Anthony Gregorc has defined learners through pairings of concrete, abstract, sequential and random descriptors. Ausburn says that the learning strategies "are learned preferences based on past experiences with learning," while Gregorc's e-mail points to his brand of traits as more fixed: "Born a dominant CS [concrete sequential] you will remain a dominant CS till death."

Ausburn also states she has "seen indications that instructors teach to the learning style they prefer," and claims: "Matching teachers and students on styles is not as important as making both aware that others do not learn as they

do..." Rita Kolody, who co-developed the ATLAS instrument and also weighed in through e-mail, asserts that "once educators identify their own preferences, they can then be more sensitive to the biases they present in their teaching." There are implications for development at the departmental level as well: When instructors have identified their own learning traits, they may collaborate with instructors who are strong in other traits to implement a wider repertoire of class activities.

#### **Skill Standards**

The new benchmark for workplace competencies appears to be 'the three Ts.' "More and more, business leaders say they want their new employees to be able to think, talk and work as part of a team," wrote Tom Holdsworth in an April/May 2007 article in the *Community College Journal*. Perkins IV recognizes the first of these (if more thoroughly spelled out) in its defining characteristics of CTE (2006). Yet it would appear there is room for improvement in employee preparation. A study from 2006 shows that, while out of the skills listed employers rated



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these same three skills as three of the top four key skills for the “two-year college/technical school diploma” category (“Are They Really Ready,” 2006, p. 21), freshly hired individuals with these credentials were deemed to lack competency by more than 20 percent of employers who weighed in on two of the three areas (2006). While perhaps not overwhelming percentages, they still indicate room for growth.

### And Here the Twain Shall Meet

Is it possible that in using learning trait assessments to find strengths and/or preferences, one can identify possible obstacles in developing certain soft skills? Ausburn says ‘Engagers’ as measured by

the ATLAS have a stronger interpersonal element than their ‘Navigator’ counterparts, who fall at the bottom of the strategy scale in this category, and Kolody claims ‘Problem Solvers’ “tend to score higher in the critical thinking domain.”

Is change possible? Concerning ATLAS learning traits, Ausburn sees adults as having a clear ability to utilize strategies other than that of their main preference. Kolody notes that the ATLAS is intended for learners to reach a point where they can select the strategy most appropriate for a specific situation, and use it. She states, “Learning strategies can be learned; therefore the identification of the learning strategy preference group will often highlight areas for development

in the other two groups,” and that, “we teach all the strategies to all the learners to fill up their toolkits.” Christopher W. Allinson, who co-developed the Cognitive Style Index (CSI) with John Hayes, e-mails in reference to his own and presumably Hayes’ perception that, “We feel that the CSI can be used to make individuals aware of their own cognitive predispositions along with the need to adopt particular cognitive strategies, which sometimes contrast with those dispositions, according to circumstances.”

Let the suggestion be made then that the postsecondary CTE instructor consider not only catering *to* students’ learning traits, but aiding in the adaptation *of* those traits to strengthen areas use-

ful in the world of work. Those who may see this as trying to force change into an individual's identity may be comforted by the philosophy of Salter et al.: "Flexibility in being able to adapt to circumstances is important, but individual style preferences can still be maintained" (2006, p. 183). This may open discussion as to what constitutes change in the self and what is merely plasticity to meet an immedi-

ing trait familiarity as an important tool to the postsecondary CTE classroom, nor view all models with favor. National Research Center for Career and Technical Education Director James Stone III, while pointing out that this area is not his forte, shares through e-mail the following comparison: "I'm a Gemini and an ENTJ [on the Myers-Briggs model]—neither has much predictive validity."

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ate need, and which theories would be accepting to and denying of this differentiation.

It may be to the advantage of learners to have learning trait tools available to them, not only for classroom learning, but also for use in addressing non-technical skills for the work world. For strategic planning of postsecondary CTE administrators in general, it may serve as an advantage for schools to implement one or more learning trait tools where there are none; if there is a tool being used already, the school may add a complement.

Not everyone may designate learn-

In one study Gregorc's model is deemed "not suitable for the assessment of individuals" (Coffield, Moseley, Hall, and Ecclestone, 2004, p. 26). However, it may still be worth noting the use of learning trait assessments as a category to make skill and information transaction more palatable to the student. Studies on student learning traits in postsecondary CTE or related environments include Ausburn and Brown's look at the ATLAS (Ausburn and Brown, 2006) and Orr et al.'s study using Gregorc's model (Orr, Park, Thompson and Thompson, 1999) as well as their later study with focus on Gregorc's model with postsecondary teachers (Thompson, Orr, Thompson and Park, 2002). Further studies with adult CTE populations could put focus on soft skill tendencies associated with various learning traits, and thus add a further dimension to the metacognition offered to students through learning trait models.

While opinions may differ as to the usefulness of learning trait familiarity, it may still be worth noting the use of learning trait assessments as a means to make skill and information transaction more palatable to the student, and perhaps as

instruments to promote metacognition concerning the individual's strengths and weaknesses in areas of soft skills as well. ■

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